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AUTHOR Williams, Geoffrey
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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes presentations from a conference organized to discuss the ways in which recent changes in the funding of British higher education seem to be threatening university autonomy and changing higher education's traditional role. Summarized reports of conference presentations are provided, under the following headings: "Autonomy: What Is Its Value?"; "The Government Viewpoint"; "Business and Academe: The Future of a Relationship"; "Alternative Funding Models and Their Implications for Autonomy"; "Autonomy and the Finance of Universities"; "Overview and Synthesis"; and "The Long Term Perspective." Included is a list of conference participants and their affiliations. (LPT)

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AUTONOMY IN THE UNIVERSITIES

A ST CATHARINE'S CONFERENCE
HELD AT CUMBERLAND LODGE
NOVEMBER 1989



St Catharine's Conference Report No. 18

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Introduction

St Catharine's Conferences are an important part of the work of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St Catharine's. Each year six such conferences are held, focusing on a variety of contemporary issues. Participation is by invitation and is intended to bring together people representative of all groups with an interest in these issues.

This conference brought together academics and others with a concern for the way in which recent changes in the funding of higher education seem to be threatening university autonomy and the rôle traditionally played in the British educational system.

The conference was greatly honoured by the participation of **Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, GCVO**, Chancellor of the University of London.

The speakers at the conference were:—

Dr Clark Brundin, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick

Professor A H Halsey, Director of the Department of Social and Administrative Studies at the University of Oxford

Robert Jackson, MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Education and Science

Sir John Kingman, FRS, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol

Uwe Kitzinger, CBE, President of Templeton College, Oxford

Peter Scott, Editor of *The Times Higher Education Supplement*

Professor Stewart Sutherland, Principal of King's College, London, and Vice-Chancellor elect of the University of London

Professor Gareth Williams, Professor of Educational Administration at the Institute of Education of the University of London.

The sessions were chaired by **Tim Slack**, Principal of St Catharine's Foundation. In his address of welcome he expressed appreciation to the Hare of Steep Trust for a contribution towards the costs of the conference.

Summary

Many factors have contributed to the changes taking place in higher education in Britain, of which recent moves to alter the basis of government support have been the most visible. The threat that these posed to the traditional autonomy of the universities and the strategies which might be adopted to cope with them provided the central focus of discussion at the conference.

What precisely was the nature of that autonomy, and how does academic freedom relate to institutional freedom? The government's case was presented: that problems of autonomy derived from single source funding and a market place approach to provide income diversification was required. The polarised response of the academic community was evident in the panel discussion, although tempered by a surprising degree of pragmatism. The alternative funding models—and associated differences in their systems of higher education—of France, Germany and the USA provided a comparative element, although in all cases the greater state commitment towards developing and underwriting the costs of higher education was apparent. Technological advances, expanding knowledge, socio-economic changes in the community at large, and differing perceptions of the rôle of higher education were all contributing to a dynamic situation and it was evident that there would be basic changes in the character of higher education in Britain as we approach the end of the 20th century.

Autonomy: What is its Value?

There was a tendency, thought **Stewart Sutherland**, to assume that autonomy, or freedom, was 'a good thing' but this is not always true. Political philosophy

distinguishes between Freedom from . . . and Freedom to . . . and this has the advantage that in adding the final word or phrase, it is made quite clear what freedoms are being claimed. Freedom carries responsibilities.

A better model, suggested Professor Sutherland, was Freedom as Self-Regulation, giving the example of Socrates who refused the opportunity to save his life by betraying his ideals. This is a supreme example of the concept of self-regulation. How can this be related to the universities?

Freedom from . . . We no longer have freedom from want, but other critical freedoms tend to be taken for granted. There is ideological pressure on universities in some countries, and foreign students here are sometimes subject to pressures from their home country. There is need also to be free from internal distortion, threatened in the sixties and threatening again as universities are persuaded to take up activities not central to their purpose.

Freedom to . . . Freedom to pursue scholarship, to research and to teach are enshrined in our charters and statutes. But even here, freedom is not absolute because some research, or even small group teaching, involve unacceptably high costs. To call for autonomy without regard to resources is unrealistic.

Freedom as Self-regulation is the preferred model, which raises questions as to the nature of the university: what are we seeking to regulate and to protect? In view of the diversity of institutions of higher education, if we are to judge whether an institution is acting with integrity clearly stated objectives and purposes, such as are found in charters and statutes, are essential.

Autonomy, in sum, is self-regulation, and that depends on the kind of institution. Can we define the kinds of integrity and self-identity that should be sought?

Teaching and research are central. What constitutes integrity in teaching? There is, of course, the basic distinction between education and indoctrination, but at the level of individual courses, objectives have to be determined and methods defined in terms of the type of knowledge and understanding to be conveyed. In this light integrity may be assessed. It may seem obvious but it has to be restated that the pursuit of truth, knowledge and understanding are necessary conditions both of *what* we teach and *how* we teach.

The idea of knowledge being owned is inimical to the idea of a university

In research, too, the pursuit of truth, knowledge and understanding should be central (this applies also to sponsored research). Does a Thesis in fact have a thesis? What does it set out to do, what question does it seek to answer and what knowledge or understanding does it explore?

We might here question what constitutes knowledge. Knowledge has to be based on evidence and argument and we must question 'knowledge' which cannot be stated and defended publicly. This opens up the issue of intellectual property. The idea of knowledge being owned is inimical to the idea of a university, for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding must be the pursuit of what is public both in principle and in practice.

Thus the integrity of an institution should show itself in self-regulation, and if this is lacking, it may be questioned whether for that institution autonomy is a good thing.

How can arguments of this kind be justified to the outside world?

- Firstly, the university is the kind of institution that a civilised society ought to have (the alternative is graphically portrayed in Orwell's 1984).
- A nation's capacity for self-determination must be built on a commitment to truth and knowledge, the pursuit of which has been the central rôle of the universities over the centuries. It must continue.
- 'Blue sky' research in the universities is critically different from the contingency-related research sponsored by the industrial sector.
- If a government, of whatever political persuasion, was tempted to remove university autonomy, it would surely hesitate, for a change of government would place enormous powers in the hands of opposing political groups.

In addition, there are internally-focussed arguments:

- The pursuit of knowledge and truth are absolute goals and ideally should not be subject to external constraints. But institutions are evolving structures. What needs to be asked is, 'Is the development proposed in line with the kind of institution this is?'
- The pursuit of knowledge and truth in the empirical sciences is through the process described by Popper as 'falsification'—challenging accepted truths on intellectual and evidential grounds. This presupposes a community committed to the pursuit of knowledge which is public, has to be defended, is evidential and is the basis for the self-regulation of the institution.

Universities have to be accountable, both to themselves and to society

Finally, there is need to guard against the university acting as an interest group. If it begins to identify with the interests of staff or students, with a political grouping, or with the liberal establishment, then it is no longer in the business of absolutes—truth, knowledge and understanding—but in the business of relativities. Universities have to be accountable, both to themselves and to society.

Alternative interpretations of autonomy were suggested in discussion. Was not independence more appropriate than freedom, as long as the need for some reciprocal engagement with society was understood? There was also the danger of mistaking university autonomy for academic freedom. Both are valuable but the notion that autonomy is the only way to protect academic freedom is peculiar to the British and the Americans.

The idea that you could draw parallels between personal and institutional integrity was questioned. Whilst an individual could choose to die for his principles, the 'trustees' of an institution might feel that they did not have that choice but rather had to struggle for survival in the hope that things would eventually improve. History suggests that social organisations have a better chance of survival than individuals.

Was the discussion not too elevated and did it see the problem for what it was—cuts in government support to the universities? Most of the problems of autonomy derive from that simple fact.

Conversely, from the government side it was questioned whether it was appropriate to underpin 'high and noble concepts of the nature of autonomy' with essentially utilitarian arguments for state finance. Professor Sutherland agreed that many of his arguments were utilitarian: as a 'Scottish commonsense philosopher' he accepted that if something was worthwhile you had to be prepared to look for the cash to support it. It should not be assumed that this would invariably come from the state. One had to be sure, however, that the price was not excessive and that autonomy was not compromised.

The Government Viewpoint

Autonomy as a moral concept is Kantian in origin, thought **Robert Jackson**. From Kant we learned to see the link between autonomy and creativity: free individuals in free communities will be the most vital and productive whilst the state can be seen as a 'deadening force'.

In the universities there are three claimants to autonomy:

The academic, who will be most vital when his freedom is self-evident but who has a duty to his discipline—the community of his fellow practitioners—and to the institution which pays him to teach.

The discipline, which can be seen as possessing a collective personality. But there is the possibility of tension with individual academics keen to pioneer new paths and with the institution whose allocation of scarce resources might not accord with disciplinary perceptions.

The institution, which like the discipline can be viewed as a moral individual whose needs give rise to tensions both with the disciplines and with members of the academic staff.

A vital university should be a market institution in a market economy

Thus for each of these autonomy is good, but their needs give rise to conflict. How to arbitrate, and who should arbitrate? This cannot be done without consideration of utility. Robert Jackson suggested 'a two-fold thesis':

- ★ that the most fundamental autonomy is that of the individual; but
- ★ that in the current British context the autonomy of the institution has to be strengthened against both the subject and the individual.

Kant recognised that autonomy was best realised in civil society and the economic equivalent of this, suggested Robert Jackson, is the market place. It follows that a vital university should be a market institution in a market economy. This implies income diversification and an income based on principles of exchange, namely payment for services rendered.

Against this logic, universities have in fact moved away from the market into the state economy. The consequent crisis of autonomy is the reason for this conference.

There are two critical aspects of the crisis:

Firstly, the dilution of institutional autonomy in favour of the individual academic, seen in the diffusion of tenure, nationalisation of pay arrangements, slackening of probationary and appraisal mechanisms and the weakening of internal management structures. Institutional autonomy has been subordinated to that of the discipline; the Universities Grants Committee has become increasingly interested in subject allocation between universities. Overall, state funding has led to internal disintegration.

Secondly, having been persuaded that economic and social benefits would derive from investment in university education, the state is increasingly concerned to derive a better return from that investment: proof that problems for university autonomy will arise if purposes beyond autonomy are invoked in its support. Thus failure of state investment in universities to secure more opportunities for the less well-off could curtail institutional autonomy by the imposition of quotas or positive discrimination policies.

Income diversification means the market place and an income derived from *exchange*. But will autonomy be compromised because of the differing values of the other agents involved? Robert Jackson's response was:

- a diversity of 'customers' should ensure institutional integrity by offering a balance of varied interests;
- the 'mission' of the university is not fixed but evolves by interaction with its 'customers'. By

being vital and responsive to changing needs universities have reshaped themselves down through the centuries;

- the university has always had a strong 'training' function—originally for the church, then law and the professions and now for the managerial cadres of society. The specification of these external ends is best done by market mechanisms.

With the object of implementing this 'broad vision' government has undertaken:

1. to disaggregate its support by moving from block funding to the concept of purchasing services: hence the separation of research funding and the notion that some teaching costs will be met from contracts. The market provision of capital funds needs to be considered.
2. to encourage universities to seek customers outside government. They should not become jobbing laboratories for industry, but apart from direct economic benefits, better liaison can in this way be developed between the science base and industry. In this context, intellectual property is something that ought to have been discovered a long time ago. Full cost fees for overseas students have also encouraged the universities into the market place, as has been the development of charged courses (for postgraduates and short courses). As a further step a fee element might be introduced for undergraduate courses, although government at present considers this a matter on which the universities should decide.
3. In line with the idea of disaggregating support, government seeks also to enable others to buy, hence the shift back to the idea of a fee paid on behalf of a student rather than block funding. Fundamental, too, is the proposal to introduce a student loan for maintenance and perhaps, in due course, other purposes.

The rebuilding of the autonomy of the institution must be seen as the central element in the government's programme for higher education, which is in turn integral to its wider objective of reviving British economy and society by reducing the power of the state and revitalising 'civil society'.

► The suggestion by the speaker that Kant would have accepted the 'economic dimension' as an analogue of his civil society was challenged: the case had to be made.

Crisis was in a sense endemic to the universities (reference was made to *The Crisis in the University*, written by Walter Moberly, the first Principal of St Catharine's). What we were now seeing was a crisis in university/state relations. The nature of the crisis was disputed, the Minister maintaining that government policy aimed to provide universities with more autonomy, whereas a speaker from the universities claimed that they were 'very conscious of considerable interference in the way we run our institutions'. There should be a clearer understanding of what the nation expects from universities which should then be left to

get on with it. The funding reductions of the eighties pose a major challenge to the freedom of the universities, now investing their energies in the struggle to manage dwindling resources. Academics in this country do not enjoy high public regard, nor are they well-paid, and concern about basic freedoms, external interference and funding constraints threatens the pleasure derived from their work.

What we are now seeing is a crisis in university/state relations

The Minister agreed that there were limits to the availability of market-derived funding for basic research. Government support for such research must continue but might be seen as a form of patronage. Many of Britain's universities were established in a period when the state was seen to be exercising the collective will of the people and upholding the moral and cultural values of the nation. Robert Jackson felt that this notion had now been corrupted: the reality of the modern state was a political arena in which self-interest was pursued and little of the idealism of earlier periods had survived. In any case, there were massive global pressures to constrain the growth of public expenditure and this meant, particularly if we were to allow for growth in our higher education system, capturing funds from private sources. Private incomes were growing and young people on the verge of lucrative careers might be expected to contribute to the cost of their education.

Why was it that so little reference was made to teaching and students in the debate? Was the disciplinary community being strengthened at the expense of the institution? Were universities, due to the decay of general intellectual values, now governed, by 'managers existing in a moral vacuum'—or was this a product of pressures which lay stress on management as opposed to intellectual qualities? Is there need, perhaps, to rethink the central concept of the university?

Business and Academe: the Future of a Relationship

In Britain, suggested **Uwe Kitzinger**, we tend to think of funding for education as expenditure whereas Japan and our European neighbours regard it as investment—investment in the economy which in turn provides for its future growth. Provision from the public purse is undoubtedly the most convenient way of funding education, but if that source is drying up, others must be sought.

We think of funding for education as expenditure, whereas Japan and our European neighbours regard it as investment

It would be useful to look at the functions that universities perform before looking at alternative funding sources. Five were suggested:—

1. To pursue knowledge for its own sake. The major problem here is that whereas in the Platonic model there is one truth to which you progress, in the modern world truth is centrifugal, not centripetal, and new branches of knowledge are constantly developing. The choice arises as to which knowledge to pursue.
2. To provide critiques of society.
3. To be custodian of a *rite de passage*—the post-adolescent period in which the young 'discover themselves'.
4. To provide vocational training. This can no longer be of the 'clockwork mouse model', which winds people up once and for all to go ticking away to retirement or burial. The explosion of knowledge and the speed of technological change require constant up-dating.
5. To research and discover useful knowledge and disseminate it.

What alternative funding sources will allow us to continue to do these things?

- Endowment is the best (for the dead don't argue!) but only the older universities are well provided in this way.
- Private funding possibilities are many and the advantages of multiple-source funding are obvious. But building a fruitful relationship with industry and commerce would not be easy; in the USA only a quarter of non-government subsidies come from that source, private munificence, notably alumni and family foundations, providing the rest.
- An education tax on businesses might be more attractive. Such taxation, based on a company's turnover or its payroll, was used by the French and had underwritten a massive development of the educational system. It had the attraction that all companies were making proportional contributions.

But in the relationship between business and academe, money should not be the sole or paramount issue. Indeed, a web of relationships has developed which have included graduate recruitment, students' industry-based project work, updating courses (these tend to be at managerial level although the need is much wider), secondments, research contracts, joint ventures and science parks, as well as gifts in kind and cash.

The problems to be overcome for business-academe relationships to prosper are many, including lack of mutual understanding; clashes between value systems, cultures and motivations; the disciplinary structure of the universities contrasted with the interdisciplinary nature of problem solving; the vexed question of publication and intellectual property; and

differing bureaucracies, reward systems and economic priorities. These problems can be solved:

- if it is understood that they are generic and not personal;
- if you have dynamic cross-cultural leadership with an understanding of both worlds; and
- if there is a willingness to spend a lot of time and effort and to be flexible.

Within the university there is also the need for a great degree of internal autonomy, recognising the disparate needs of colleges, research centres, faculties, departments and staff. Decentralisation could also allow cross-fertilisation between departments of the same discipline in different universities.

Greater autonomy within the university will help not just to stay as we are, but in adapting to changes and in exploiting the challenges which are opening up in this fast changing environment.

► A key issue raised in discussion was the scale of funding needed for projected increases in student numbers: non-state sources would be totally inadequate for the doubling suggested by Mr Baker at Lancaster or even the more modest proposed rise from 15 to 25% by the end of the century. Industrial money tended to be short-term, and could British industry in its present state provide continuing funding on the required scale? As to an education tax on the French model, if it was introduced would not industry prefer to support in this way the education of 16–19 year olds?

What in fact was industry looking to the universities to provide which would ensure their co-operation? Well educated young people was one response, from both the humanities and the sciences, so there was no need to worry about the neglect of non-science areas. Others were unconvinced that industrial support would be so broad ranging and foresaw an increase in the range of vocationally-orientated courses. Unlike the polytechnics, the universities had in the past not provided training for other bodies' qualifications, and this might need rethinking. Others warned of the pressures that could accompany the further development of vocationally-orientated courses and there was a call for the distinction to be drawn between education and training: higher education should be education—not training—and the government should recognise this.

The fundamental problem in this country is the loss of credibility of education in the eyes of the mass of the people

If we were simply interested in industry's money, perhaps we should focus on marketing prestige, buildings and conference facilities? There were moral issues involved in selling educational services to industry, for by definition these services were also useful to others who might not be able to afford to pay. The

perceptions held by industry and commerce of the educational (as opposed to the training) needs of its workforce would in any case need to change. Dancing to industry's tune would also do little to resolve the fundamental problem in this country of the loss of credibility of education in the eyes of the mass of the people. This was contrasted with the high regard which Americans have for the value of higher education and the diverse ways in which it is supported in that country (although it was maintained that, contrary to popular conception, direct funding by federal and state governments is no less than in Britain).

Alternative Funding Models and their Implications for Autonomy

Money was the real key to autonomy, thought **Clark Brundin**. He pointed out that whilst there were obvious contrasts between European systems of higher education, all were essentially centrally funded and support from the public purse is actually higher than in this country. For diversification of funding we have to look across the Atlantic.

One stark contrast with the USA is the lack in this country of any co-ordinated discussion of higher education: there was no umbrella organisation, nor did government address the issue as a whole. Those involved did not meet to talk about problems privately and collaboratively: discussion tended to be public with competitive stances being taken.

An underlying problem is the labour-intensiveness of higher education. In a society where productivity is increasing, the GDP rises more rapidly than inflation and wages faster than prices. It is thus unrealistic to insist that educational costs should rise by no more than the retail price index. Instead, education spending should be index-linked to incomes.

Quality control is a notable feature of the British system, with careful monitoring of student welfare and high completion rates. But the latter is achieved by a too selective admissions system, excluding many who ought to be able to succeed. We should be content with lower completion rates. Institutions belonging to the American Association of Universities (AAU) have a five-year completion rate of about 60% with a range of 33–87%. The lack here of massive institutions, such as in the USA, helped to maintain academic quality, a point to be borne in mind when planning future development.

The major problem is that in this country, unlike America, higher education is not seen as something to which all should aspire

There are three basic sources of funding: government (ie. the taxpayer), industry and philanthropy, and parents and students. It will surprise some to hear that in the USA real expenditure by the states on higher education, as measured against the cost/prices index, had increased by 22% in the decade to 1989/90. From

industry and philanthropy (notably endowments) the American system as a whole receives just 8% of its income, although a typical AAU institution would do better—perhaps 10–12%—with a handful of very highly endowed institutions doing better still. As to parents and students, the decline of stable family units is a growing problem. Student loans are being backed by the UK government, but a major defect of the proposed scheme is that it includes a parental contribution—in fact often non-existent—in calculating the need for support.

The major problem is that in this country, unlike America, higher education is not seen as something to which all should aspire. Until we have dealt with that, we should be cautious of changing the system of student funding. Even the Americans are wary of schemes based on the anticipation of high future earnings.

Change is needed, but it should be gradual. There is also need for public debate and for government to state clearly its long term proposals. In the USA 66% of the population attends high school and 32% go to college, but only 16% complete higher education. This latter figure is not dramatically higher than in the UK. Clearly we have a way to go but in different directions from that which we are led to believe.

We have not come to grips with a situation of urgent national importance

The second speaker, **Sir John Kingman**, was struck by the lack of urgency evident in the discussion: we had not, he suggested, come to grips with a situation of urgent national importance.

Key elements of the present situation were:

- that the government would not sanction increased public expenditure on higher education—a policy which he doubted would change with a Labour government;
- that free higher education is the policy of both parties;
- that there was an urgent demand for more graduates, by industry and commerce, the schools, and the public services, which would not be met by blurring the boundaries between higher and further education. Access needed to be broadened and this meant additional funding.

Industry was prepared to pay more for the right graduates and we need to be able to take advantage of that. Unfortunately the problem of access is more difficult to solve.

At one time key agents of social mobility, allowing children of the less well-off to climb the ladder of opportunity, the universities are today used by the middle class to ensure that their children remain in middle class occupations. Thus the resources of the population at large are being used to support a small

and already privileged group of young people. It is difficult to defend a system which does that.

The challenge is to devise ways in which additional resources can be brought to enlarge and improve the system, whilst ensuring that public expenditure is for public purposes, including a measure of equity. The costs of university and polytechnic courses need to be stated. Then we can talk of cost sharing between the public purse, the student and his/her family, benefactors, and potential employers. The student needs to be seen as the real customer and it would be better if money now available through block grants could be channelled through the student.

Detailed schemes have been prepared which seem to be workable. They involve extending means-testing to include course costs. Families able to contribute towards the cost of higher education would be doing so, freeing resources which could be used to broaden access. Any new system should be judged largely by its effect on increasing access.

Institutions should be able to fix their own fees, to compete in price as well as quality. There should be a real incentive for universities to attract more students and to assist this by creating scholarship funds.

Such a system would offer autonomy to the universities, and they would do their jobs better. They could decide their priorities, justifying decisions not to funding councils but to the real customer, the student. Funding limitations would not be entirely removed by such a scheme but it would offer alternatives to government and the funding councils.

Institutions should be able to fix their own fees, to compete in price as well as quality

However, the main justification for the proposal is that it would free public resources to achieve the real aims of higher education. Whether to increase student numbers or to increase our technological focus, we are now unable to realise these aims because resources are tied up by the single requirement of free tuition.

► Much of the discussion focussed on Sir John Kingman's proposals. Was he not exaggerating the gravity of the situation? Government had announced changes in the fee structure and was moving in the direction he had indicated. It had not said that it would not increase public spending on higher education, but that the share of public spending allocated to it should not be significantly greater. The increase in pupils staying in school, following the introduction of the GCSE, was encouraging and could outweigh the demographic down-turn.

The maintenance grant was the focus of much discussion: Britain was unique in encouraging students to study away from home (although Scottish students were more home-based) which was costly. Some saw it as one of the most valuable aspects of higher education, for others it bolstered privilege, most polytechnic students and all in higher education colleges

tending to live at home. It accentuated the differential between higher and further education and contributed to the 'extraordinarily class-stratified system of higher education in this country'.

Britain is unique in encouraging students to study away from home

Few saw the proposals being made by Sir John as contributing to greater equality and improved access. In particular differential fees were seen as perpetuating inequality and the spectre was raised of a cheap and low quality system for the majority and a higher quality system for those who could afford it (or with access to scholarships).

The notion of the student as customer also brought criticism: surely society was the customer? Students were not necessarily well informed and their viewpoint is inevitably short-term: the scheme would help to remove autonomy from the universities. It was also doubted whether the scheme could produce the level of resources required for the changes necessary to the system. And was it proper for the universities to be making such proposals? Political questions were raised which required public debate and the universities risked attracting the approbation which properly belonged to government.

What was being proposed was in essence privatisation and 'any scheme to privatise higher education is based on an implausible premise—that as a society we don't have enough faith to invest in it but that if we disaggregate as individuals we would recover this faith'. History suggests the opposite! 'I have to say' said Sir John in a concluding response 'that I am with the emotional reaction of much of the audience in hating to have to examine this sort of proposal. We'd all much prefer greater public investment in higher education, but to plan on the basis that we'd be let off the hook is surely irresponsible.'

Clark Brundin concluded by underlining the advantages of a tiered system of higher education on the Californian model, noting the illogicality of the British system.

Autonomy and the Finance of Universities

There were, suggested **Gareth Williams**, three perceptions of the rôle of universities: the monastic, public service and market models.

The monastic idea—a community upholding the pursuit of knowledge and understanding for its own sake—has been most influential in Britain through the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

In France the concept of **universities as public corporations** has been dominant, service of the state being the main function (particularly as expressed in the *Grandes écoles*). This idea was taken up in Russia, and in a slightly different form in Germany.

The *market model* is associated with the USA, and the Rt. Hon. Mr Kenneth Baker MP, when Secretary of State for Education and Science, expressed a preference for this: 'the other route, that of the United States, which I would prefer, would see the movement towards mass education accompanied by greater institutional differentiation and diversification in a market-led and multi-funded setting'. Even so, the state contribution to higher education in relation to national resources is greater than in the UK. However, the system upholds the student as a customer whose demands are met, whilst a tendency for available places to exceed demand is another feature of the system: 7% of recurrent expenditure in higher education institutions is devoted to marketing and recruitment.

In practice, systems of higher education incorporate elements of all three models. In Britain reliance on state funding has tempered the extent to which academics can be monastic and inward-looking; French universities have achieved a degree of *de facto* independence and the autonomy of German universities and staff has been written into the constitution. In America Federal and State governments are actively involved in funding higher education, including student support, and a markedly hierarchical structure of universities has developed.

The key issue is the ways in which the ethos of a model colours the views of institutional managers. Thus in Britain the monastic ethos makes it difficult for us to accept either the concept of the university as a public corporation providing public service, or as an economic enterprise selling academic services.

The development of a knowledge-based society requires an enormous expansion of higher education. The richer the society, the greater the demand for access to knowledge. Knowledge is seen as a commodity which can be bought and sold and it is in the USA that issues associated with intellectual property have been most fiercely contested.

The accelerating scientific revolution has brought other problems. Research is ever more specialised and elitist whereas the teaching function of the university caters for an ever-widening clientele. The hierarchical structure of higher education is the American response, whilst the French have evolved the *Grandes écoles* and separate research institutions. In Britain the approach has been confused: we create polytechnics but stress their similarities with universities.

Funding is a central problem. Whereas in the 1960s in most countries it was accepted that public funding would provide for the expansion of higher education, today the belief is equally widespread that expansion will only be possible with extra funds from private sources.

Raising funds for public service or market demands is easy—not so for disinterested scholarship

These sources include fees, which account for 14% of university income in Britain (cf. 4% in France, 12% in the Netherlands and 22% in the USA, although except in France a large part of the fees is publicly funded. Germany levies no fees). The other source is the sale of academic services to industry. This provides only 4% of the income of British universities (cf. France 6%; Germany 7%, the Netherlands 8% and USA 8%). There is scope for growth but clearly such income will never substitute on a large scale for public funds. This is not true of all subjects, or all universities, but such funding is usually short term whereas universities need to promote longer term values and benefits.

Raising funds for the public service function or for meeting market demands is relatively easy, but not so for disinterested scholarship. For this to be supported cross-subsidisation is essential and is only possible in large integrated institutions.

The debate should move away from how private funding might be increased towards the more important question of the proper rôle for public funding. We should not so readily accept the idea that there is no scope for increasing expenditure on higher education. But government has no need to provide what business is prepared to offer, rather it should seek to underwrite long term activities, where benefits are collective.

► In discussion the adequacy of the three-model basis of Gareth Williams's talk was questioned. Should there be a fourth category—the liberal university model—for institutions providing a high-level but general education? The speaker thought that this could be subsumed within his monastic model, but others felt it inadequate to categorise in this way the provincial universities developed during the 19th century. Should there also be a 'wall-less model' which would stress the value of the potential for interaction between ordinary people and the university?

We should not think in European terms: each country had its own problems and achievements. Thus the length of time students took to get a degree was worrying the Germans and the French were concerned with drop-out rates. European systems were more rigid than ours. Most was to be learned from America, but not just about the market.

In seeking to accommodate government's demands we must not overlook our strengths. Academics elsewhere recognise the merits of the British system and cannot understand why we so undervalue it.

There was finally an appeal to remember that the noble idea of the university has survived in Europe for almost a thousand years (and even longer in Africa). It has proved valuable in every society. We should remember in moments of cynicism that it has much to offer for the future.

Overview and Synthesis

Why, asked Peter Scott, had autonomy been chosen as the subject of the conference? There was little concern

for this issue ten years ago. Some of the factors influencing this change have been external, others internal to higher education.

External influences include:

- cuts in public expenditure on higher education;
- the introduction of a more aggressive management and greater distinction between administrative and academic staff;
- a feeling that the University Funding Council is 'not as user friendly' as the old University Grants Committee;
- the often hostile comment about the universities by senior government officials, including the Prime Minister.

Internal influences, perhaps of greater importance, include:

- the centrifugal character of modern knowledge; subjects have less common ground and so are more tightly bound up in managerial structures;
- the decay of a shared culture of broader intellectual values;
- the many and varied rôles taken up by higher education additional to teaching and research;
- the growth in the number and variety of institutions;
- the many different types of students, many of whom in the past would not have been considered for higher education.

All this has meant that discussion of autonomy is timely. But there were problems:

It was often unclear whether discussion was about institutional autonomy or academic freedom, and whether the latter was of the discipline or the teacher. Is institutional freedom a precondition for academic freedom and thus the central freedom to be defended?

It was also unclear whether 'university' was being used as a generic title for higher education institutions or whether entitlement to a greater degree of autonomy was suggested.

Why should higher education, and not education in general, have this special claim to autonomy? It is argued that it sets intellectual standards for the schools and continuing education, but increasingly standards are externally set. Baroness Warnock has argued that the university is involved with indeterminate knowledge whereas schools are concerned with settled or determined knowledge. But universities have a concern for a traditional corpus of knowledge and curricula could be more adventurous in the schools where teaching is increasingly enlivened by notions of indeterminism, discovery and empathy.

Why should higher education, and not education in general, have this special claim to autonomy?

And should higher education claim freedoms other than those enjoyed generally in a democracy? In higher education freedoms have to be institutionalised and institutions are expensive of resources: that's why so much of our discussion has concerned funding. Higher education is also the province of the expert and experts enjoy particular freedoms. However many practice outside the educational system and society is increasingly sceptical about unconstrained expertise. Intellectual freedom is also seen as necessary for creativity.

A further argument is that autonomy is necessary because higher education should offer a critique of society (although if this claim is pressed too hard it can appear that we are claiming to stand outside the constraints of democracy). But this can be interpreted in various ways:

There is first the view of the university as an ivory tower—a place of reflection rather than action. In fact the historical record suggests that this rôle has been insignificant: certainly such a view could no longer be justified. There is secondly the view of higher education providing not just a critique of society but moving towards opposition to it. This is unacceptable if it seeks to stand against the democratic principles of society and tends to caricature the state in an unrealistic way. A third justification is found in the notion that higher education is the guardian of basic intellectual principles. Our acceptance of this makes it difficult to talk of students as customers; notions of intellectual authority and tradition are involved. Finally, there is the concept of the university upholding civic values, carrying on the culture of the past.

The relationship of higher education and democracy is uncomfortable because higher education is inevitably selective and elitist to some degree. And how we fund it is important, reflecting in a fundamental way the value we place upon it as a community. Public funding implies public commitment which suggests public use and so leads to wider access.

Autonomy in higher education has to be linked to notions of accountability and responsibility and to the idea of social and individual emancipation. It requires:

1. the re-creation of general intellectual values to underpin it and to balance disciplinary values. This is a problem not just for higher education but for society at large;
2. an external focus. German universities in the 1930s rejected this, failing to recognise and respond to events happening in the country. British higher education has not that predicament, but it does need an external moral focus if it is to sustain its claim for autonomy.

The potential for conflict in the present resource squeeze was underestimated

Peter Scott concluded by highlighting some issues which had been raised in discussion groups:

- The potential for conflict in the present resource squeeze was underestimated. Students' demands for greater autonomy, for example, could extend to getting rid of poor teachers and easing transfer between institutions. This would require greater course uniformity which could restrict institutions in setting goals and standards.
- Unlike applicants to European universities or state universities in the USA, students in Britain possessing basic entry requirements cannot assume that they will find a place. Can this continue?
- There was a strong sense that academic democracy was a good thing and a necessary constraint on enhanced managerial energy; administrators should keep to their rôle.
- There was an encouraging commitment to wider access and a conviction that higher education should expand. This mood of advance rather than retrenchment is hopeful and will extend to society in general. We should not lose sight of the significant social and intellectual successes of higher education in this country.

The need for external reference points was critical: the university should not be a self-justifying institution

► The relationship of the university and the state was the focus of much of the discussion. It was suggested that 'true universities' only existed in free societies, which raised again the question of the university in Nazi Germany, moving from that to Eastern Europe in the post-war years and China in 1989. And what of Northern Ireland? Was not the autonomy of Queen's University challenged because of constraints on ideas in the society around it? Accountability was a key issue and the universities were accountable not to their paymasters—governments—but to the wider constituency of society. The need for external reference points was critical: the university should not be a self-justifying institution.

How democratic were the higher education institutions themselves? A large number of those who formed part of the university community seemed to have very little say in decision-making and in practice universities seemed not to be very humane places. Could we not make our universities more participatory institutions? Scottish universities, by contrast, seemed more democratic. Indeed there were lessons to be learned from Scotland in a number of areas (eg. levels of access).

The Long Term Perspective

A H Halsey started with figures based on his recent survey of university opinion, using comparative figures from 1964, the time of the Robbins Report. First there was the rising tide of support for higher education:

What proportion of the population could benefit from higher education?

	1964	1989	
		Univs.	Polys.
More than 20%:	52%	94%	94%
More than 30%:	13%	37%	44%

Other questions revealed current attitudes towards the student loans issue and attitudes towards academic life:

	Univs.	Polys.
<i>Preference for student grants rather than loans or mixture of two</i>	71%	75%
<i>Public respect for academics has declined over the decade</i>	90%	78%
<i>Seriously considered leaving academic life</i>	37%	39%
<i>If starting again would choose another profession</i>	28%	35%
<i>Universities should be subject to less government control</i>	87%	—
<i>Salaries too low to attract staff of required calibre</i>	92%	91%

By contrast opinions about trends in standards of teaching and research had moved in the reverse direction:

<i>Teaching quality has declined over the past decade</i>	23%	21%
<i>Research quality has declined over the past decade</i>	31%	27%

Associated with these trends is a change in political alignment of staff:

	1964	1989	
		Univs.	Polys.
<i>Conservative</i>	38%	18%	18%
<i>Labour</i>	45%	37%	44%
<i>Liberal</i>	15%	28%	18%
<i>Other</i>	1%	0%	3%
<i>Green</i>	—	7%	11%
<i>SDP</i>	—	10%	7%

There has been a marked decline in Conservative support, although the 1989 figures were gathered before the dramatic fall-off in support for minority parties in the middle of that year.

The universities do nothing that is not being done by other institutions

Returning to the theme of autonomy, Professor Halsey thought that we had failed to reach a conclusion. We clearly felt that the universities were very

special, but (interpreting Peter Scott), it was necessary to remind ourselves that they did nothing which was not being done by other institutions. The origin of the word university, a union, is indicative of this. In an etymological sense the TGWU has as much right to use this word as Oxford University or Kingston Polytechnic! Thus, the university may lay claims to certain privileges in society, but it has no monopoly.

Historically it is a story of the struggles by this particular union to ward off attempts by external agencies—kings, capitalists, barons, and bureaucrats—to turn autonomy into heteronomy. However, the conclusion to be drawn from the history of the universities up to the 20th century was that if you really want a safe autonomy, choose marginality.

Threats to autonomy have been more insistent in the 20th century, and 1919 is a key date for in that year three key institutions were founded, the Universities Grants Committee (UGC), the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and the Association of University Teachers (AUT). All threaten autonomy, all are both external and internal.

Thus in 1919, through the UGC, the universities were linked to the state, but the nature of that relationship has critically changed. Then the key feature was a social relationship, mostly of men with common backgrounds and interests, the sum involved being approximately £2 million. It was a period when academics could live as though they were a combination of the aristocrat and the Franciscan. We now have a large scale bureaucracy concerned with a sum of about £2.5 billion. The break occurred after World War II when the amount of money provided by the state for the universities took on an exponential growth rate. Only since the late '70s has it shown a down-turn.

1973–74 was the critical year: the price of oil quadrupled, inflation set in and academic costs revealed their tendency to rise faster than the RPI. The enemies of autonomy then changed their strategies. Key developments have been:

The UGC's 'Strategy for the Nineties', a strategy of selectivity to manage the consequences of exponential growth. Assessment of departmental research performance along with student numbers and income from contracted research was to be taken into account in determining block grants. Worse was to come. In 1981–82 Rothschild had thrown over the Haldane principle (established in 1918) that the state should never interfere directly with civil research: henceforward in applied research there should be a customer-client relationship between government and the universities. This led on to the 'Strategy for the Science Base' of the Advisory Board of the Research Councils in 1987 which proposed three levels of universities: X type universities of a world class to be funded at the level necessary to maintain the most expensive forms of research; R universities, which would have graduate students but which would not be considered world class; and T universities, which would not teach beyond Master's level.

These are just one or two examples of the current onslaught on autonomy and clearly the events which started in 1981 are going to continue. Universities have always had to strike a bargain with the societies in which they exist. The future is one of maintaining autonomy by ensuring multiple sources of funding, public and private, and managing academic affairs within the university in such a way as to avoid over dependence on any particular source of support.

► The speaker's characterisation of the UGC as a threat to autonomy was challenged in discussion. Rather, it freed the universities from outside pressure and for half a century was a benign and hands-off paymaster. Before its introduction universities were much more constrained, depending on tuition fees, philanthropy and industrial support. On this basis they were unable to meet demands made of them in the first World War, hence the creation of the UGC. Yet we are urged to return to this failed model!

The distinction between the hierarchy of higher education advocated by Clark Brundin and the tiered system proposed for this country was emphasised: in the latter, value judgements are being made whereas, for example, American liberal arts colleges played a different rather than a subordinate rôle.

The universities and the polytechnics should make common accord

There seemed to be agreement that the universities and the polytechnics should make common accord if they were to persuade the nation to provide the resources and the autonomy necessary to do their job well. It was, however, noted that technological development was tending to disaggregate the education industry and to talk in binary terms overlooked the variety of provision which was developing.

Finally, the speaker was challenged about his emphasis on monasticism and 'the dreaming spires': we should not play at being part of the heritage industry. The universities were all effectively created in the 19th and 20th centuries and are products of our industrial society. Professor Halsey said that he saw 'the rhetorical conception of a higher intellectual life as . . . a kind of moral duty laid on us', but accepted the many other functions of higher education listed by Uwe Kitzinger, many of which would be best organised through the use of market principles. Pressed to declare what values higher education should seek to uphold, he suggested that it was 'to have, to nurture and to prosper all those institutions which will result in a political electorate with the maximum political intelligence combined with a labour force which is maximally adapted to survive in the modern world'.

Report by Geoffrey Williams

PARTICIPANTS

Eric Anderson, Head Master, Eton College; **David Barnes**, Senior Research Fellow in Engineering, University of Salford; **James Binns**, Lecturer in Medieval Studies, University of York; **Peter Blake**, Headmaster, The Windsor Boys' School; **Tessa Blackstone (Baroness Blackstone)**, Master, Birkbeck College, University of London; **Andrew Blowers**, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Degree Studies), the Open University; **Lalage Bown**, Head of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Glasgow; **Peter Boyce**, Vice-Chancellor of Murdoch University, Western Australia; **Michael Brock**, Warden of St George's House, Windsor Castle; **Clark Brundin**, Vice-Chancellor of Warwick University; **Judith Brundin**; **Elizabeth Burge**; **Ted Burge**, Emeritus Professor of Physics, University of London; **Tom Burgner**, General Secretary of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals; **Terence Berlin**, Rector of the Polytechnic of Central London; **Tony Clark**, Head, Higher Education Branch, Department of Education and Science; **Valerie Cromwell (Lady Kingman)**, Reader in History, University of Sussex; **Raoul Franklin**, Vice-Chancellor, City University; **Bob Fryer**, Principal, Northern College, Barnsley; **Frank Griffiths**, Deputy Director (Planning), Leeds Polytechnic; **A H Halsey**, Director, Department of Social and Administrative Studies, Oxford University; **Charles Harvey**, Reader in History, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London; **Andrew Howard**, Postgraduate student in the Department of Government, London School of Economics; **J Maxwell Irvine**, Dean of Science and Professor of Physics, Manchester University; **Caroline Jackson**, MEP; **Robert Jackson**, MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Education and Science; **Walter James**, former Principal, St Catharine's Foundation; **Antje Kell**; **Douglas Kell**, Reader in Biological Sciences, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth; **John Kingman (Sir John Kingman)**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol; **Uwe Kitzinger**, President, Templeton College, Oxford; **Christine McCrum**; **Michael McCrum**, Master of Corpus Christi College and formerly Vice-Chancellor, University of Cambridge; **John Martin**,

Personal Assistant to the Principal, Strathclyde University; **Terry Melia**, Chief Inspector in Further Education, Department of Education and Science; **Philip Moore (Lord Moore)**, Chairman of the Trustees, St Catharine's Foundation; **David Murray**, Professor of Government, The Open University; **Louise Naylor**, Lecturer in Biology, University of Kent; **David Packham**, Senior Lecturer in Materials Science and Chairman of Academic Assembly, University of Bath; **Pauline Perry**, Director, South Bank Polytechnic; **Celia Phillips**, Dean of Undergraduate Students and Lecturer in Statistical and Mathematical Sciences, London School of Economics; **Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, GCVO**, Chancellor of the University of London; **Helen Robinshaw**, Postgraduate Student at Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge; **Naomi Sargant (Lady McIntosh)**, Deputy Chair, Polytechnic of East London; **Peter Scott**, Editor, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*; **Kate Slack**; **Tim Slack**, Principal, St Catharine's Foundation; **John Spencer**, Professor of English Language Studies, University of Bayreuth, West Germany; **Craig Stephenson**, Postgraduate Student, Department of Social History, University of Warwick; **William Stubbs**, Chief Executive, Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council; **Sheena Sutherland**; **Stewart Sutherland**, Principal, King's College and Vice-Chancellor elect, University of London; **Ronald Swan**, Vicar of St Mary's, Harrow on the Hill; **John Treadgold**, Canon of St George's Chapel, Windsor and Chaplain to the Queen; **Christa Veile**, Student Co-ordinator, St Catharine's Foundation; **Roy Wake**, Educational Advisor, British Atlantic Committee; **James Walsh**, Registrar, University of Leeds; **Diana Warwick**, General Secretary, Association of University Teachers; **Dorothy Wedderburn**, Principal, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London; **David Weitzman**, Dean of Science, South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education; **Celia Weston**, Education Correspondent, *The Guardian*; **Ann Williams**; **Gareth Williams**, Professor of Educational Administration and Chairman, Department of Policy Studies, Institute of Education, University of London; **Geoffrey Williams**, Director of Studies, St Catharine's Foundation.

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